

When the 25 seniors in Chris Sparks and Todd Szwed's Human Rights and Law class got an assignment to design and implement a project to better a community, the choice was simple.

The class decided to raise money to purchase 17 new iPads, with cases and chargers, for autistic students in the special education program. They had learned that iPads help nonverbal autistic students develop language and life skills, but when they asked special education teachers how many iPads were in use in the school, they found that the 19 autistic students in East Hartford High School's special education program had to share two devices.

"We had 30 topics to choose from, big and small, and it was the easiest thing to actually see in our community," senior Luis Diaz said.

Diaz's classmates agreed and said the project connected real world issues, like access to education, to their community in East Hartford and allowed them to do something impactful in their own hallways.

"Every human deserves an education," Alina Figueroa said. "I was so surprised when I learned they didn't have enough iPads."

Shavone Miller, another student in the class, said she was upset when she found out that the 19 autistic students were sharing two devices. She said some classes have iPads for all students because someone donated them specifically to that class or for that use.

"A lot of states don't fund for autism education and programs, it comes from the parent's and guardian's pockets," Miller said. "It was pretty upsetting. The school doesn't even have something to let them better their education."

Special education teacher Julie Rowland said she's seen the difference in the way her students learn by working with an iPad.

"It's been a really good experience for them," Rowland said. "For me, I love using the iPad because it promotes so many things — it promotes language, it promotes behavior, it really helps them with those life skills."

For example, Rowland said one of the apps she uses with her students is an online payment system — similar to Apple Pay or Google Wallet — that lets her students pay for things in an easy way. Many of the students are nonverbal and the iPad facilitates communication between them and the people they interact with in the community. Rowland said that using the iPad also gives her flexibility to tailor instruction to her individual students' needs.

"You can enlarge things for the kids who don't have an easy time seeing, you can change subjects quickly without having to print things out or plan too much," Rowland said. "The possibilities are endless because it's portable."

After hearing the special education teachers speak about how iPads help the autistic students, the students snapped into action fundraising to purchase the remaining 17 iPads. While they are relying heavily on traditional fundraising methods like bake sales, cash drives and selling concessions at athletic events, they've also turned to social media.

"The easiest way to reach our peers is through social media," Andrew Restrepo said. "We post on Twitter, hope someone retweets the picture and more people see it."

The class has set up a GoFundMe webpage (<http://www.gofundme.com/y4kfe7uc>), as well as an Instagram account, to promote their campaign.

The group has raised \$515 of its \$1,500 goal. The students have a number of fundraising events planned, including several during April — Autism awareness month.

Figueroa said that during April, collection tins in teachers' names will be set up in the cafeteria and at the end of the fundraiser the teacher with the most money in their jar will have to dye their hair blue. She said they will also be educating their peers about Autism during an assembly period, putting up fliers and continuing to do bake sales on top of the bigger fundraiser.